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DANTE AND BEATRICE

AN ESSAY IN INTERPRETATION

BY

LEWIS F. MOTT, M. S.

Tutor in the College of the City of New York.

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831 & 833 SIXTH AVENUE.
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1892



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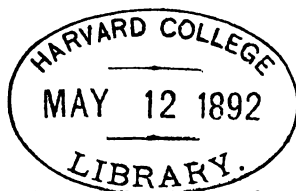
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PRESS OF WILLIAM R. JENKINS,
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Ln 162.2



The Auction

DANTE AND BEATRICE.

O a student of literature, one of the most important and interesting sentiments which influenced mediæval life, is that of chivalrous love. It was the spur of knightly endeavor, the seed of courtesy, the soul of song. From it was thought to spring all virtue and all happiness. In an ideal devotion to his chosen lady, the knight found the chief motive of his enterprises, the most potent incentive to noble and heroic action. What he realized in deed the poet set forth in verse. The beauties and virtues of his mistress furnished him an inexhaustible theme; her eyes were his inspiration; her countenance, his heaven; the thought

NOTE.—For the quotations from the *Vita Nuova* I have used the translation of Charles Eliot Norton; for those from the *Divine Comedy*, Long fellow's version.

of her, a magnetic power sufficient to draw him away from evil to the gates of Paradise.

Although this sentiment had its birth and reached its greatest development in the south of France, it yet pervaded the life and the poetry of every nation in Christendom and dominated polite letters until the glimmering stars of the middle ages faded in the splendor of the renaissance. Even then it would not die. Discarded by society, it found refuge among the Muses. With "our sage and serious poet Spenser," it survives as a literary tradition, employed to propagate Puritanical religious and moral ideas, but this was its last earnest appearance. For the later poets it has become a mere plaything of the fancy. As a real and living influence, it disappeared long before Don Quixote sallied forth to accomplish his astonishing achievements in honor of the fair Dulcinea.

Even in Dante's day this flower of chivalry had begun to wither. The golden age of its singers had departed. What had been the ideal of courtly life, had become a beautiful fiction, still celebrated by the versifiers, it is true, but in songs which had lost their vitality

because they had lost their truth. The old conceits, the old phraseology, the old forms remained; but the spirit of life had fled. A dull, miasmatic conventionality brooded over Italian poetry and poisoned the national genius.

It was about the middle of the twelfth century that wandering troubadours overspread Italy, sang their lays before the various princes, and impressed their ideal upon courtly life. Native imitators followed, composing their mimic love-ditties first in Provençal and later in Italian. But this counterfeit literature, so contrary to the spirit of the race, was short-lived and feeble. The ornament of palaces and the glory of princes, it flourished only in the sunshine of royal favor and found its most congenial habitation at the luxurious Sicilian court of Frederick II. Here the minstrel found an unfailing welcome and a rich reward. The Emperor himself and his minister, Pier delle Vigne, were noted rhymsters, though their verses appear to us little better than might be expected from an absolute monarch and a secretary of state. But the imperial sun had hardly set when the fair exotic faded

and died. Enzo, the captive king of Sardinia, might well send his canzonetta forth from his dungeon with instructions to "Salute Tuscany, she who is sovereign, in whom reigns all courtesy." The genuine literature of Italy was already born in Florence.

Native and original as it was, this literature still copied the old forms. Its progenitor was the poetry of Provence. The proud citizens of Florence, emulating the cavaliers in prowess and in courtesy, strove also to emulate them in song; but they could not be satisfied with a colorless repetition of extravagant sentiments which had been the baubles of frivolous courtiers. The Italian nation, "born old," as Symonds says, required reality and truth for the basis of serious poetry. Lifeless mannerism and affectation yielded to true feeling. They poured new wine into the old bottles. The love songs of the Troubadours, turned to fresh uses, chanted the praises of a fairer mistress, whose beauty faded not with age, whose eyes shone with a radiance almost divine, whose service was the path of peace,—Madonna Philosophy.

The master and model of the new school

was Guido Guinicelli, whose earthly habitation was Bologna, but who lingers in memory as a denizen of the last circle of Purgatory, where he expiates the sin of lust in the midst of flames whose fervent heat made Dante long to cast himself into molten lead for refreshment. To this singer of dulcet lays

“Which, long as shall endure our modern fashion,
Shall make forever dear their very ink,”

Dante pays his tribute of homage and affection. He even calls him

“The father
Of me and of my betters, who have ever
Practised the sweet and gracious rhymes of love.”

Throughout the Divine Comedy it is Virgil who is the pilgrim's father, master and guide. It is Virgil to whom alone he owes “the beautiful style that has done him honor.” It is Virgil who introduces him to the company of ancient bards into which he is received with permission to rank himself by the side of that “loftiest of poets,” of Homer, Horace, Ovid and Lucan, sixth of the glorious group. The symbolism is clear. The Mantuan, “honor and light of the other poets,” led him “through

utter and through middle darkness," and was the fountain of his epic song. From him he learned that mastery of language which no other poet of his nation can emulate. From him came those germs which, implanted in his rich nature and nurtured by years of study, discipline and heroic struggle, grew into qualities that have won him a place among the masters of the human spirit. But Dante distinguishes his obligations, and while he thus honors the guide who led him to the summit of Parnassus, he does not forget the singer of dulcet lays who taught him the sweet and gracious rhymes of love. For Dante is not only a world-poet, the lonely wanderer through Eternity; he is also a Florentine of the thirteenth century and the first writer of a school. Around him cluster Guido Cavalcante, "the other eye of Florence," Cino da Pistoja, and many others, whose productions, well-nigh indistinguishable from each other, are often confounded with those of the master himself. They wrote on the same topics, used the same phraseology and dwelt among the same thoughts, as the youthful author of the *Vita Nuova*.

The great poet does not rise, surrounded by solitude and silence, to pour forth divinely inspired songs. He does not sing as the bird sings that dwells among the branches. His poem for many a year must make him lean. Offspring of toil and pain, it must also be the child of joy. He must conquer his own kingdom, yet a triumph that costs too much is as fatal almost as defeat, and therefore it is that Nature, Art and Science must conspire for his benefit. Many must sow that he may reap and a hungry world be fed. There must be heard voices crying in the wilderness to prepare the way for him. Mankind must be ready to listen when he comes, and there must be some to give responsive utterance. The strongest swimmer needs to be borne along by the tide in order that he may reach the happy isles. Such preparation for his coming and such encouragement in his work, were vouchsafed to Dante. Nourished by the sentiments and learning of the middle ages and quenching his thirst at the ancient "fountain which spreads abroad so wide a river of speech," he grew strong enough to withstand the storms of his century and, by victory over himself and

over his art, to win his throne among the immortals.

Dante obtained his first fame as the singer of love and Beatrice. Following in the footsteps of the Provençal poets and using the traditional forms, he surpassed all who preceded him and, in his own generation, stood easily the first. Even Petrarch, the pre-eminent and representative lover of the middle ages, seems, in comparison with his earnestness and passion, to be coldly toying with pretty sentiment. His vividness of vision, reality of feeling and unfailing appropriateness of expression made him the leader among the writers of the "sweet new style." The frigid conceits of the troubadours, taken up into his heart for a season, and then poured forth in his verse, flame with intense significance; lifeless philosophical types are moulded by this new Pygmalion into forms of flesh and blood; the playthings of the heart and the tinsel of the intellect become, at his touch, the ideals of life.

"One am I, who, whenever
Love doth inspire me, note, and in that measure
Which he within me dictates, singing go."

Thus he answers Buonagianta da Lucca in Purgatory and indicates the reason of his superiority. He felt the love that he expressed. Had he not explicitly told us so, it would still be apparent from his poems themselves. Such palpitating life does not spring from the empty forms of art or from the conventions of fashionable society. The life of the poet and the life of his songs are one.

Some have doubted the material existence of Dante's heroine, and would reduce her to a creature of his imagination or to an allegorical phantom ; but, to say nothing of the insuperable difficulties which beset such theories in the disposal of the incidents recorded by the poet, an imaginary Beatrice is a moral impossibility. His real feeling had a real object. He loved, not merely with his intellect or with his fancy, but with his whole being. If we compare the poems of the *Vita Nuova* with those of the *Convito*, we shall easily perceive the difference between the language of a real love and the language of an allegorical love. Madonna Philosophy has some beautiful verses in her praise, but they are beautiful verses, not the outpouring of a bursting heart. He

calls her "piteous and humble, wise and courteous in her greatness." Love which discourses of her in his mind touches things concerning her that confound the intellect, so that he has not the power to speak what he hears of his lady. Her beauties overcome our minds as the rays of the sun our weak vision; therefore he cannot gaze upon her fixedly and must be content to say of her but little. These are not the words of the lover, but of the "studious martyr of a mild enthusiasm," whose spirit has the wings of song. The mistress of the schools is attractive and grand, but Beatrice carries love in her eyes and what she gazes upon grows noble, or perishes; a spirit moves from her lips which bids the soul to sigh; the beauty of her smile cannot be told, or even remembered. Love himself marvels that mortal creature can be so fair and so pure. Heaven has but one defect, that she is not there.

Dante was but nine years of age when "the glorious lady of his mind" appeared before his eyes, "clothed in a modest and becoming crimson, garlanded and adorned in such wise as befitted her very youthful age." He saw

and was conquered. "At that instant," he writes, "I say truly that the spirit of life which dwelleth in the most secret chamber of the heart began to tremble with such violence that it appeared fearfully in the least pulses, and trembling said these words: *Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur mihi.*—Behold a god stronger than I, who coming shall rule over me." The convulsive passion of a moment, calmed by grief and sanctified by death, became the motive power of his career, for from that time forward, though the illusory promises of pleasure might lure him aside for the moment to pursue after false gods, 'Love lorded it over his soul.' In honor of Love he wrote his poems, to the service of Love he dedicated his life.

Diotima of Mantinea, the wise woman who instructed Socrates in the mysteries of love, taught him 'that he must begin in youth to turn to beautiful forms, and that first he must learn to love one such form only, out of which he should create fair thoughts; proceeding then from this to others, he will soon recognize that the beauty in every form is one and the same, and he will become a lover of all beau-

tiful forms; he will be led further to consider that the beauty of the mind is more honorable than the beauty of the outward form; and thus, passing onward to the beauty of laws and sciences, drawing toward the sea of beauty, and creating and beholding many fair and noble thoughts in boundless love of wisdom, he will behold the vision of a single science which is the science of beauty everywhere, he will mount upward, under the influence of true love, till he is enabled to live in the contemplation of absolute beauty and, in that communion, beholding her with the eye of the mind, he will receive power to bring forth not images of beauty, but realities; he will become the friend of God and gain, if it be granted man to gain them, the rewards of immortality.'

What the wise woman taught Socrates was revealed to Dante by the God of Love himself. It is true that the lyrists of Provence had developed a code of doctrine similar to the Platonic philosophy expounded in the Symposium, but their songs echo rather the speech of Agathon than that of Socrates. Love was to them the source of every good. From his lady's eyes the troubadour drew all the virtues

valued at court. In order to be worthy of her regard, he strove to become a model of courtesy and valor. His life was to be governed by unfailing devotion to an ideal image of her erected in his heart. Therefore he sang of love, what Agathon spoke: "That he is the fairest and best of himself and the cause of what is fairest and best in all other things." But as Dante's mind and heart were deeper than theirs, so was his ideal more beautiful. He passed from the love of a human being to the love of wisdom, from the love of wisdom to the love of God. Yet in this progression his love for his lady did not fail. It grew with his growing life. She who 'from a slave had brought him unto freedom,' continued to be the one 'in whom his hope was strong.' It was 'the sun that erst with love his bosom warmed' who 'discovered to him the sweet aspect of beauteous truth.' Beatrice remained to the end 'the sunshine of his eyes.' She was not absorbed by abstractions, she absorbed them. She did not fade into a phantom flitting among phantoms; she never ceased to live; her personality dominated every thought, and all that was good and all that was beautiful became a part

of her and was called by her name. The spoils wrested from study, life and meditation, he spent to adorn this blessed one. Every new beauty that his eyes gained the power to see, he perceived in her. By gazing steadfastly upon her, he ascended to Paradise. Lifted from Heaven to Heaven by her smile, he mounted to the Empyrean and, as he won new heights, he perceived his advance, not by any change in his surroundings, but by noting that she had grown more beautiful.

Such a conception did not burst upon Dante full-blown the instant he beheld that little girl clothed "in a modest and becoming crimson." It was developed through many years of study, experience and earnest thought, years whose spiritual struggles are portrayed in his verse. At first he differs from his predecessors more in the intensity than in the character of his feeling. They coax themselves to love, he loves of necessity. Their idle words have for him a real significance, which deepens and broadens with time. Guided, not by the lamp of philosophy, but by that of experience, he penetrates and explores the mysteries of love. Death and bitter sorrow bring their gifts.

The fair promises of earth turn to ashes in his grasp, but, as they wither, his lady 'who makes him strong for Heaven' shines with ineffable loveliness. She leads him on beyond the stars, unfolding beauty upon beauty before his enraptured gaze and glowing ever with diviner radiance. The lyrics of his youth melt into the mystic chant of Paradise. The mortal puts on immortality. At last he can sing no more. The sweet smile of Beatrice is merged in the absolute beauty.

"From the first day that I beheld her face
In this life, to the moment of this look,
The sequence of my song has ne'er been severed;
But now perforce this sequence must desist
From following her beauty with my verse,
As every artist at his uttermost."

But love had not always been to him a source of happiness and peace. His early years were full of tempest. The sun shone fitfully through hurrying clouds. It was only gradually that the darkness cleared away leaving his heaven serene and revealing the full splendor of the light of his life. For many a month he ate his bread with tears and countless weary nights of weeping were exacted

from him as the price of his acquaintance with the heavenly powers. It is this story of grief and weakness growing into joy and strength that we read in his youthful poems.

At some time between 1290 and 1300, apparently, Dante gathered a few of these pieces together, wrote for them a commentary in prose, and sent them forth under the rubric, "Incipit Vita Nova"—"Here beginneth the New Life." It matters little whether we interpret the words, "Vita Nuova" to signify "New Life," or "Early Life": in either case the meaning will be substantially the same. The book which narrates the growth of his love for Beatrice opens with the beginning of a life. His blessed one appeared, and from that moment he dated the birth of his spirit, feeling that only then, when Love came to rule over him, could he truly say that he had begun to live.

In brief outline the story of the *Vita Nuova* is as follows: Nine years after first meeting with Beatrice, Dante received "her most sweet salutation," which possessed such virtue that he seemed to behold "all the bounds of bliss." Betaking himself to the solitude of his chamber, he was visited by a marvellous vision.

Love appeared before him in a cloud of fire bearing in his arms the sleeping "Lady of the Salutation," and in his hand the poet's flaming heart. At length, having awakened her that slept, the god caused her to eat "that thing which was burning in his hand, and she ate it as one in fear. After this, it was but a short while before his joy turned into most bitter lament; and as he wept he gathered up this lady in his arms, and with her it seemed that he went away toward heaven." Roused by his anguish, the dreamer began to reflect and, thinking on what had appeared to him, he resolved to make it known to many who were famous poets at that time, and therefore he composed a sonnet in which, after saluting the liegemen of love, he told them that which he had seen in his slumber and prayed them to give an interpretation of his vision. Many and diverse were the replies, but "the true meaning of this dream was not then seen by any one," though later it became "plain to the simplest." After this vision, his natural spirit began to be hindered in its operation and he was wasted by his passion, but when asked, "For whom has Love thus wasted thee?" he

smiled and said nothing. In order to screen his real feeling, he even pretended to love another, and "wrote for her certain trifles in rhyme." His "most gentle lady, who was the destroyer of all the vices and the queen of the virtues," imputing evil to him, denied him "her most sweet salute" in which lay his bliss, and grief came upon him so that he wept bitterly, "calling-upon the lady of courtesy for pity." All his thoughts discourse concerning Love. He argues about him, knows not whether his lordship be good or evil, for although "it withdraweth the inclination of his liegeman from all vile things," yet "the more fidelity his liegeman beareth him, so much the heavier and more grievous trials he must needs endure." Then, leaving his doubts, he resolves to sing henceforth only the praise of his lady. But it seems a theme too lofty for him, so that he dares not begin. At last his tongue is loosened and he speaks, not hoping fitly to celebrate his mistress, but eager to ease his mind. She is the desire of the angels, the masterpiece of Nature, the blessing of all who approach her. *Quo modo sedet sola civitas!* His pæan of praise is abruptly broken off by the death of

this most gentle one. His piteous songs, the daughters of sorrow, go their way weeping and disconsolate. His sighs call upon his lady, who has passed from this distressful life, which was undeserving of anything so gentle, "to a world worthy of her virtues." He is envious of whoever dies. Some time afterwards, haggard and woe-begone, he lifted up his eyes and saw "a gentle lady, young and very beautiful, who was looking at him from a window with a face full of compassion, so that all pity seemed assembled in her." Soon his eyes began to delight too much in seeing her; he was often angry with himself and esteemed himself mean. Though he sometimes called his thoughts gentle, he knew that they were vile. Then he began to waver, thinking: "This is a gentle, beautiful, young, and discreet lady, and she has appeared perchance through the will of love, in order that my life may find repose." Thus his heart weakly inclined to yield: but one day about the ninth hour, there rose within him a "strong imagination" against this "adversary of the reason"; for he seemed to see the image of his glorified lady as she had been when she first appeared to him, whereupon

his heart began bitterly to repent of its so wicked longing, his eyes became "two things that desired only to weep," and all his wandering thoughts "returned to their blessed Beatrice."

Upon this narrative Dante freely expended the riches of his genius, crowning his love with a diadem of the fairest jewels. Yet the value of his little book is not limited to its poetic beauty. Through this beauty glows the soul of the poet. Beneath the fantastic extravagance and the impossibilities, which veil but do not hide his inner life, we can discern the gradual growth of his character. Shone upon by an overpowering emotion, his spirit rises from the earth, blossoms and brings forth fruit. His love enlarges and purifies his soul and, conversely, every step in his own development makes his love more beautiful. Originating in a sudden ecstasy and intoxication of spirit, it changes slowly and through the discipline of much sorrow into the calm power that rules his life. It is because the *Vita Nuova* portrays the early stages in the evolution of this emotion that it has such deep and enduring interest.

In the first pages of this volume we encounter a vision of his lady's death. Love appeared, he tells us, in the "form of a Lord of aspect fearful to whoso should look upon him; and in his words he spake many things which I understood not save a few, among which I understood these: *Ego Dominus tuus.*" This dread lord was indeed his master and, although the poet could then understand but little, although his tumultuous feelings rather confused than enlightened him, this one thing was plain. Other matters were unfolded in the course of time. He learned the full meaning of that dream in which the god fed his Lady with his burning heart and then fled away with her toward Heaven. But at first all was dark to his eyes, blinded by excess of passion, and from the turbulence of his soul emerged but one definite feeling, a certainty that swept along and swallowed up all else—victorious, resplendent, irresistible—the certainty that he loved.

His lady had already begun to 'imparadise his mind,' but throughout these earlier years, his passion appears to have been a fountain from which flowed weakness as well as strength.

He grows frail and feeble, asks if there be any grief greater than his own. At the sight of Beatrice his frightened spirits are stricken, so that some are killed and others expelled, and Love alone remains to gaze upon her beauty. He is indeed subject to a "Lord of aspect fearful to who so should look upon him," a lord who wastes his vassals at the same time that he confers new powers upon them. Dante received these powers and, by using them, he rose from servitude to independence, from submission to mastery. The source of his youthful weakness is this, that his life is ruled from without instead of from within. His happiness and his woe depend upon the actions of others. His inner life has hardly yet begun, but the seed is planted and the tender shoots give their first greeting to the sun. If the season favors, they will grow.

Was it not a sense of the fraility of this new-fledged life that caused Dante to guard it so carefully? When he was asked: "For whom has Love thus wasted thee?" he smiled and said nothing. His feeling was too sacred to expose to the rude glances of a mocking world. The profane might enter the outer court of the

temple, but the holy of holies they must not be allowed to penetrate. When rumor said that he pined away for another, he took great comfort, knowing that his secret was secure. At every cost he sought concealment. It seemed so important to him that when the lady who had been his defence departed to dwell in a distant place, Love appeared to him in a vision and directed him to choose another for whom he should feign affection. Gradually, as he gained in depth and power, this reserve faded away. He grew willing to disclose himself, first to the gentle and courteous, then to all the world. It gave him wonderful delight when persons ran to see his most gentle lady and said as she went by, "This is not a woman; rather she is one of the most beautiful angels of heaven." He resolved to speak her praise "to the end that not only those who might actually behold her, but also others, might know of her whatever words could tell." And he spoke, not because his love was less sacred to him, but rather because it had grown altogether heavenly and passed beyond the reach of sacrilege. He knew that the vile in heart could not imagine aught concerning his blessed one.

Dante's poems, like the writings of every great author who reveals himself in his works, are a study in self-control, a history of the emancipation of a character and the enthronement of a will. At first, as has just been said, the ruling power was without him, not within. His bliss lay in his lady's salutation, in her eyes alone was paradise and when she was withdrawn he walked in darkness. The virtues of her greeting he thus declares :

"I say, that whenever she appeared in any place, in the hope of her marvellous salutation there no longer remained to me an enemy ; nay, a flame of charity possessed me, which made me pardon every one who had done me wrong ; and had anyone at that time questioned me of anything, my only answer would have been 'Love,' and my face would have been clothed with humility. And when she was about to salute me, a spirit of Love, destroying all the other spirits of the senses, urged forth the feeble spirits of the sight, and said to them, "Go and do honor to your lady," and he remained in their place. And whoever had wished to know Love might have done so by looking at the trembling of my eyes. And

when this most gentle lady saluted me, not only Love had no power to shade for me the insupportable bliss ; but he, as if through excess of sweetness, became such that my body, which was wholly under his rule, oftentimes moved like a heavy, inanimate thing ; so that it plainly appeareth that in her salutation abode my bliss, which oftentimes surpassed and overflowed my capacity."

When Beatrice, influenced by the gossip of idle tongues, was led to deny Dante that bliss, he entered upon a season of bitterness and despair. Then was fought "the battle of diverse thoughts." He flung himself into the arms of pity, though it was very hateful for him so to do, and wrote to his lady disclosing his condition and begging for her sympathy. Love appeared to him in a vision and, looking at him, wept piteously. "Lord of nobleness, why dost thou weep?" asks the sufferer ; and Love replies : "I am as the centre of a circle, to which the parts of the circumference bear an equal relation ; thou, however, art not so." Thinking on these words, Dante finds that the God has spoken very obscurely, but his questions fail to elicit any explanation of the oracle.

"Ask no more than may be useful to thee." Such is the sole answer which the dreamer can obtain. Indeed, the meaning of those mysterious words could not then be told him in speech. Experience alone could make it plain. In the companionship of sorrow, the poet found wisdom and, after dwelling many days in the mansion of tears, he too learned to become "as the centre of a circle." Then he understood why Love had wept and then he knew that Love need weep no more.

The assaults of doubt and selfishness were repelled. His Lady was "not as other ladies whose hearts are lightly moved," nor was he, as other men, inconstant. To his friend he said: "I have set my feet on that edge of life beyond which no man can go with intent to return." That edge of life he passed. Pursuing his rugged path, he climbed the mountain from whose summit the eyes of the glorified Beatrice should lift him to Heaven. These days of conflict and of stormy complaining were followed by a brief period of silence. He listened, doubtless, to the voices of very blessed ones who brought him peace, for when he broke that silence, it was with a noble hymn

of praise. The first sickness of his new life was passed and, though he still had much to suffer and much to learn, though there were still many dark valleys to cross, he had within him the strength of victory.

The circumstances of his recovery he thus narrates : Chance led him one day to pass near a group of ladies, and one of them, calling to him, said these words: “ ‘To what end lovest thou this thy lady, since thou canst not sustain her presence? Tell us, for sure the end of such a love must be most strange.’ And when she had said these words to me, not only she, but all the others, began to await with their eyes my reply. Then I said to them these words : ‘My ladies, the end of my love was formerly the salutation of this lady of whom you perchance are thinking, and in that dwelt the beatitude which was the end of all my desires. But since it has pleased her to deny it to me, my lord Love, through his grace, hath placed all my beatitude in that which cannot fail me.’ Then these ladies began to speak together ; and as sometimes we see rain falling mingled with beautiful snow, so it seemed to me I saw their words mingled with sighs. And after

they had somewhat spoken among themselves, this lady who had first spoken to me said to me these words: 'We pray thee that thou tell us wherein consists this beatitude of thine.' And I, replying to her, said thus: 'In those words which praise my lady.' And she replied: 'If thou hast said truth in this, those words which thou hast spoken, setting forth thine own condition, must have been composed with other intent.' Then I, thinking on these words, and as if ashamed, departed from them, and went saying within myself: 'Since there is such beatitude in those words which praise my lady, why hath my speech been of aught else?'"

From that day his joy was assured. The thought that, as a vague apparition, had often flitted through his dreams, was henceforth to live with him as a reality. He no longer asked for his lady's affection, or even for her pity. He needed none. He simply surrendered himself without reserve to his own vast love, demanding no return, and in this sacrifice of self, he found the richest recompense. He gave all, and he received the blessing. He would love endlessly, since every increase of his love was

an addition to his imperishable treasures. Therefore he finds his bliss in those words which praise his lady and fill his heart with holy flames. His surroundings are nothing. Even in Hell among the evil ones he will say, "I saw the hope of the blessed." There can be no Hell for him who carries Heaven in his soul.

Dante's whole life now plainly puts on a new aspect. Love comes to him, no longer weeping, but joyfully, and says: "Take heed that thou bless the day on which I took possession of thee, for thou oughtest so to do." "And of a truth," the poet adds, "it seemed to me that my heart was so gladsome, that it seemed to me it could not be my heart, because of its new condition." In this spirit he continues to chant the praises of his mistress, singing her beauties and her virtues, which honor all who approach her. Then he turns to speak of his own condition—how changed! Love, who was very cruel at first, now rests sweetly in his heart and sends his sighs forth in words which call upon his lady to look upon him and thus give him still greater blessings. He is lifted above the common life of man into an ethereal

region in which only beautiful spirits can sustain themselves and where even the shadow of death will be permitted to blot the eternal radiance but for a moment.

This shadow of death, indeed, broods over the *Vita Nuova*. It darkens the first pages, then hovers dubiously in the background, and at length settles down, like a starless night, upon that wanderer straying in the gloomy wood. The book opens with a vision of his lady's death. A few pages further on, we see one of her companions whose body "is lying without its soul," whereupon the poet reviles "Discourteous Death, Foe of pity, Ancient Mother of pain." The father of Beatrice dies and she weeps so "that whoever should behold her must die of pity." Dante, moved by tenderest sympathy, stands by the way and also weeps, until the passing ladies say: "This one who is here is weeping neither more nor less than if he had seen her as we have." Then comes the thought: "It must needs be that the most gentle Beatrice shall at some time die." "And thereupon," writes the poet, "a strong bewilderment so overcame me, that I closed my eyes, and began to be distracted

like a person in a frenzy, and to imagine in this wise: that at the beginning of the wandering which my fancy made certain faces of ladies with hair dishevelled appeared to me, and they said to me, 'Thou too shall die.' And after these ladies there appeared to me certain strange faces, and horrible to behold, which said to me, 'Thou are dead.' Thus my fancy beginning to wander, I was brought to such a pass that I knew not where I was, and it seemed to me that I saw ladies with hair dishevelled go weeping along the way marvelously sad; and it seemed to me that I saw the sun grow dark, so that the stars showed themselves of such a color as to make me deem they wept; and it seemed to me that the birds as they flew fell dead, and that there were very great earthquakes. And in this fantasy, marvelling and much fearing, I imagined that a certain friend came to me to say: 'Dost thou not know? Thine admirable lady is departed from this world.' Then I began to weep very piteously, and wept not only in my imagination, but wept with mine eyes, bathing them with real tears. I imagined that I looked toward heaven, and it seemed to me that I saw

a multitude of angels, who were returning upwards, and had before them a little cloud of exceeding whiteness; and it seemed to me that these angels sang gloriously, and the words of their song it seemed to me were these: 'Osanna in excelsis!'—and aught else meseemed not to hear. Then it seemed to me that I went to behold the body in which that most noble and blessed soul had dwelt. And so strong was the erring fancy, that it showed me this lady dead; and it seemed to me that ladies were covering her head with a white veil, and it seemed to me that her face had such an aspect of humility that it seemed to say, 'Now do I behold the beginning of peace.' In this imagination there came upon me such humility through seeing her, that I called upon Death, and said: 'Most sweet Death, come unto me, and be not discourteous to me; for thou oughtest to be gentle, in such place hast thou been. Come then unto me, who greatly desire thee; thou seest that I already wear thy color.' And when I had seen all the mournful mysteries completed which are wont to be performed for the bodies of the dead, it seemed to me that I returned to my chamber; and here it seemed

to me that I looked toward heaven, and so strong was my imagination, that, weeping, I began to say with my real voice, 'O most beautiful soul, how blessed is he who beholdeth thee!'"

This vain phantasy, as Dante at the time regarded it, was soon realized in fact and he found the city a solitude. He had lost his Beatrice. Abandoned by his welfare upon earth, he wept until his eyes grew weary of weeping.

Thus we come to the second stage in the progress of Dante's love, its sanctification by death. His cup of bitterness overflowed. What his life became after his Lady went into the new world, there was not a tongue that would know how to tell. Yet he had found strength to bear it. Tears of grief and sighs of anguish waste his heart, but there is no more despair. He does not now revile Discourteous Death. "Beatrice has gone into the high heaven, into the kingdom where the angels have peace." Death has become a friend. He calls her "soft names in many a mused rhyme," and now it seems indeed "rich to die." Through the gloom that hangs about him, we see, now and then, gleams that betoken

the coming brightness. He cries out: "O Beatrice, and art thou dead!" and even while he calls on her, she comforts him. For she is not dead; he has not lost her; she remains always a "presence to be felt and known." In his deepest anguish he can sing: "The pleasure of her beauty, departing from our sight, became a great spiritual beauty, that spreads through heaven a light of love and salutes the angels."

By this transfiguration Beatrice did not fade into an insubstantial dream. She remained to Dante a real person, more real, in fact, than those who walked the earth. On the first anniversary of the day in which she had become "a citizen of the eternal life," he sat thinking of her and drawing upon some tablets the picture of an angel. Certain people of importance, whom it was fitting to honor, came and stood watching him, but for a time he did not notice them. When, finally, he became aware of their presence, he rose to salute them saying: "Another was just now with me, and on that account I was in thought." The world might account these men great and do them honor, but when Beatrice lingered by her

poet's side, he saw them not—they were but shadows.

One more revolt, followed by one more passionate torrent of tears, and his love has grown complete. A piteous lady strangely thrills him with her compassionate eyes. He struggles in the meshes—shall he withdraw from the bitterness of love? But Beatrice comes to him in that ninth hour and he sees that the bitterness of love is sweeter than the honeyed fruits which grow along the "paths untrue." Never again does he waver. On his thoughts and sighs are written "that sweet name of his lady and many words relating to her death." Soon his tears cease. He must not weakly weep for his beloved, he must live for her. 'His sigh passes beyond the utmost sphere that moves, until it sees a lady who receives honor and shines gloriously.' So sings the last sonnet of the *Vita Nuova*, and the book closes with these words :

"After this sonnet a wonderful vision appeared to me, in which I saw things which made me resolve to speak no more of this blessed one, until I could more worthily treat of her. And to attain to this, I study to the utmost of my

power, as she truly knoweth. So that, if it shall please Him through whom all things live that my life shall be prolonged for some years, I hope to say of her what was never said of any woman. And then may it please Him, who is the Lord of Grace, that my soul may go to behold the glory of its lady, namely, of that blessed Beatrice, who in glory looketh upon the face of Him *qui est per omnia saecula benedictus.*"

With these words the *Vita Nuova* passes into the Divine Comedy. The new life has begun, and all that belongs under the rubric "It beginneth," has been written. The progress of this life and its results will be told when he to whom it was given shall be more worthy to speak.

Dante lived to finish his poem and to perfect his love, making "his life a true poem." The Divine Comedy is not a magnificent mausoleum in which he has entombed his feeling for Beatrice amid all the miracles of mediæval art. It is rather a garden in which his love grows ripe. We have traced this love through its early phases. Beginning in passion and desire, it underwent bitter discipline and grew calm,

beautiful and self-sufficient, till it filled his soul with happiness. When this happiness set in the night of death, the sad lonely one strayed away after false lights, but he came back in tears to his blessed Beatrice, she, he says, "who lives in heaven with the angels and on earth with my soul." Thenceforth he dedicated himself to the perfection of that love. Whatever storms might beat upon him from without, his inner life was full of unspeakable joy and peace. Love could no longer say to him : "I am as the centre of a circle, but thou art not so" : for the poet and the God were one. Within him lived a blessed saint who lighted all his being with a smile

"Such as would make one happy in the fire."

To grow worthy of the love that he felt was the purpose of his life ; how he grew thus worthy is the story of the Divine Comedy. Self-centred and calm, he passed from the apprehension of utter evil, through the purification of penitence and right effort, to the contemplation of perfect good. This arduous ascent he was compelled to accomplish by his own efforts ; his good angel could only watch over him from afar and come to him in times of weariness and des-

pondency, but when at last he had climbed to the summit and proved his worth, he was lifted into heaven by her eyes.

Dante's experience, both objective and subjective, presented itself to him in a double aspect—as reality and as symbol. He wove a mystic meaning around the simplest facts of life, and often many interpretations are to be found for a single episode. In the *Convito* we are told that the piteous lady, who pleased him too much, is Philosophy; but in the *Vita Nuova* she is obviously a real person, and to the penitent sinner weeping on the mount of Purgatory, she must have seemed an emblem of all his failures and wrong-doing. Thus, too, Beatrice, the perfect woman, becomes often a personification of Theology, the perfect science. Her eyes are its demonstrations and her smile its persuasive power. The mystic number nine clothes her life with miraculous significance and in heaven she is “the fount whence springs all truth.” She solves the poet's doubts by delivering subtle lectures upon the spots on the moon, the freedom of the will, the justice of God, and other nice questions of scholastic divinity. Can this tendious pedant be the

blessed Beatrice whom we have known, her fair countenance wrinkled, her locks turned sadly gray, her sweet voice hoarsely croaking solemn nothings which we listened to with patience, not delight? Indeed, that blessed one has not so changed. The reporting words are weak and the brain sometimes obscures the message it would transmit. Beatrice is scholastic theology, but she is more. She includes it and rises above it, as she includes and rises above everything that Dante found worthy of honor. She is the highest that his thought and feeling can reach. Reverence "makes itself mistress of his whole being, merely by *Be* and *Iœ*," for his love hallows the very name. He set before himself the loftiest and purest ideals, and to be false to them was to be false to Beatrice. This is the Lady of the Divine Comedy. She who, with tears, begs Virgil to hasten to the aid of her friend impeded on the desert slope; she who reproves her lover for his untrue life; she who, from her throne so far away, seems to smile and look once more upon him as he prays, is not a dull abstraction: she "lives in heaven with the angels and on earth with Dante's soul."

The Divine Comedy is a hymn in honor of Beatrice. How could this be fitly accomplished and his lady duly praised? How, but by singing that pilgrimage, in which he was guided by wisdom and drawn upward by love; his rescue from the gloomy wood; his perilous passage, unscathed, through the realm of devils; his weary climbing of the mountain of well-doing, climbing to meet his lady on the summit, struggling toward her, from darkness to the light, from hideous evil to everlasting beauty, from infinite pain to infinite happiness; and then—the flight to Heaven, lifted by her glorified eyes.

The presence of Beatrice pervades the poem. She furnishes to the pilgrim the motive for his journey, the steady power to sustain its irksome weight, and the "end of his desires." Because he loved her so much he issued from the vulgar herd. She sends Virgil to lead him through the dark profundities of Hell. In those abodes of sin and horror, her sacred name must not be spoken, but a mere hint of her existence can overcome the opposition of the fiends and compel them to give the travelers their sullen and unwilling aid. At a few

words concerning her. Purgatory unbars its gates. That hill is grievously steep and the ascent is very long and very wearisome. Often it seems too much for the breathless toiler's strength. Yet when Virgil utters these words :

" I speak
Of Beatrice ; her shall thou see above,
Smiling and happy, on this mountain's top,"

He instantly replies :

" Good leader, let us make more haste,
For now I do not tire me as before."

The last circle of Purgatory, in which the guilty are cleansed from lust, is shut off from Paradise by a wall of flame. Before this Dante stands motionless and terrified. He cannot pass. All Virgil's persuasions fail to move him, until at length he says :

" Now look thou, son,
' Twixt Beatrice and thee there is this wall."

Hesitating no longer, Dante plunges into the fire and, encouraged by discourse of his lady, he passes through the unmeasured burning without harm. Even that he can conquer for love of her. Now his arduous journey is over and, in that delectable forest where she can

come to him, he stands, a poor unworthy one, and yet a conqueror. Alas! he had not been always true, he had not made the best possible use of his life, and though the height was won at last, it was after much backsliding and many falls. Turning to the angels around her, Beatrice tells the story of her lover's life :

"Some time did I sustain him with my look ;
 Revealing unto him my youthful eyes,
 I led him with me turned in the right way.
 As soon as ever of my second age
 I was upon the threshold, and changed life,
 Himself from me he took and gave to others.
 When from the flesh to spirit I ascended,
 And beauty and virtue were in me increased,
 I was to him less dear and less delightful ;
 And into ways untrue he turned his steps,
 Pursuing the false images of good,
 That never any promises fulfill ;
 Nor prayer for inspiration me availed,
 By means of which in dreams and otherwise
 I called him back, so little did he heed them.
 So low he fell, that all appliances
 For his salvation were already short,
 Save showing him the people of perdition.
 For this I visited the gates of death,
 And unto him, who so far up has led him,
 My intercessions were with weeping borne."

The penitent one, who, by untiring battle with his own rebellious nature, has beaten it down

into subjection to his will and thus earned the right of penitence, in utter self-abasement and humiliation, confesses his wrong-doing:

“ Weeping I said: “The things that present were
With their false pleasure turned aside my steps,
Soon as your countenance concealed itself.”

That countenance will be concealed no more. His tears and sufferings and labors and conquests have opened the way to pardon. His lady unveils to him her beauty, and he passes to another life in which there is no struggle and no pain, naught but perfect love and calm and joy. From Heaven to Heaven, the beauty and the love increase. When Beatrice, among the fixed stars, bids him cast his eyes down upon the earth, he glances at it for a moment, then with renewed ardor turns to her. Earth has ceased to interest him. Art and Nature are nothing in comparison with the divine delight that shines from his lady's smiling face. So he passes on toward the highest, until, 'The ardor of desire within him ended,' he sees Beatrice melt away into the Supreme Light and he himself is lost in the Glory Infinite.

Thus Dante narrates the story of his love. He might have walked the beaten paths of life

safe, respectable and commonplace, but his love drew him away to newer regions, more dangerous, it is true, but vastly more beautiful, and full of limitless possibilities. When his lady died he was left wandering in the gloomy wood. His thoughts became confused, right and wrong left their definite features, and Vice grew lovely, so that she resembled Virtue. Such was his peril when the image of Beatrice again grew strong within him and, filled with deathless love for her, he resolved to devote himself to high ideals. He began to study the learning of the ancients, searching out the nature of evil and probing it to its uttermost depths. Under the guidance of the wise Virgil, who was sent by his lady to show him the way, he passed through Hell and, having vanquished its devils and learned its secrets, he "came forth to behold the stars." As the journey through Hell typifies Dante's release from doubt and his coming, by means of the study and experience which love inspired, to a full knowledge and assurance of evil, so his laborious ascent of the mountain of Purgatory represents his battle against sin. He was not only to know, he was to do. His love was not to be a mere romantic

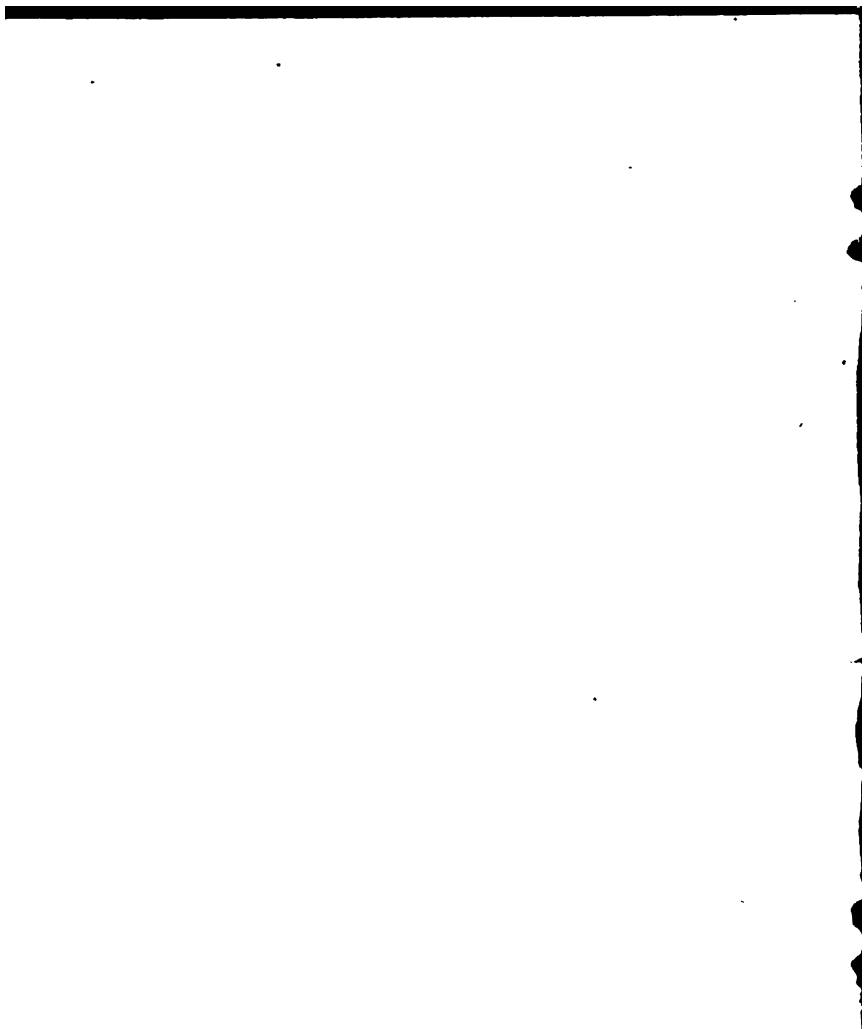
emotion floating languorously across the dainty fictions of an idle fancy; it was to be a life, stern, real and inflexibly severe. One by one, his sins, and his longings for sin, must be sacrificed to that austere, but beautiful ideal. So he climbs from circle to circle until the fire is passed and, purified from all the lusts of the flesh, he has grown worthy to stand before his lady and utter words of humble penitence. He has been beautified till he can perceive her unclouded beauty. Every veil of earthly desire that could come between them has been withdrawn. From this time the thought of her is heaven. His inner life becomes an ecstasy. The "passion for perfection" which has so long tormented him is stilled, and he passes into the serene region of eternal peace. Here there can be no struggle and no labor, for every thought is perfect joy and every feeling is perfect love. Earth fades in the dim distance and, as he rises higher and higher, to be absorbed in ever more intense delight, his lady blooms into infinite beauty. Yet "not in her eyes alone is paradise." He is emancipated even from their sweet power. She has led him to absolute freedom and, when, at the end, she departs

from his side, it is a separation that can bring him no pang of regret ; for he too is lost in the essence of the same all-pervading spirit which she inhabits. From her throne on high, she glances at her lover while he prays to her, then turns to the eternal fountain, and Dante, rapt in adoration, feels his soul overflowed and irradiated by an irresistible love,

“The love that moves the sun and the other stars.”







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